Pronoun Usage in the College of Social Work

Honors Research Thesis

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by

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Abstract

There is a substantial body of literature dedicated to queer social work students' experiences in their programs, as well as social work students' knowledge of queer topics. However, there is currently a lack of research on pronoun usage in the context of social work education. This study analyzed the responses of social work students at The Ohio State University to a mixed-methods online survey about queer topics, with particular attention to pronoun usage. The results showed that students desire more resources on pronoun usage and transgender issues, and are uncomfortable correcting themselves or others when misgendering occurs. Instructors are also not consistently asking students for their pronouns; over half of students reported no instructors asking for their pronouns during introductions in the Spring 2020 semester. Additionally, all students in this study who identified as trans had experienced being misgendered in their programs. This is likely not an experience unique to the College of Social Work and speaks more broadly to the issue of misgendering on college campuses. Implications of this study include increasing educational resources on trans issues, targeted marketing of queer-focused social work courses, and implementing gender-neutral language in coursework and syllabi.

Keywords: explicit curriculum, implicit curriculum, LGBTQ+, pronoun usage, queer, readiness to practice, social work

Chapter I: Statement of the Problem

This study intended to gather information on how Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University have experienced queer topics—particularly pronoun usage—in their social work programs.

Definition of Terms

Queer

When discussing the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other sexual and/or gender minority), it is important to understand and acknowledge the vast number of terms used by the community to describe their identities and experiences. This paper switches between LGBTQ, LGBTQ+, and LGBT when synthesizing existing literature. Queer is used when referring to this study as an umbrella term to describe people who do not identify with heteronormative identities and desires. Kole (2007) explains why this is preferred:

> "...'queer' is preferred over other terms… by many activists and individuals since it does not confine sexual identities in fixed LGBT categories and allow for much space and ambiguities for diverse sexualities to be included. Queer encompasses a multiplicity of desires and diverse sexualities outside the homo/heterosexual matrix in which identity is seen as performative, something that we do and act out rather than possessing it, and something that we assemble from existing discursive practices... 'Queer/ness,' thus, by its very nature of inclusiveness, can be viewed as another concept that by way of encompassing every possible sexual diversities in one single fold, attempts to obscure spatial and temporal differences in multiple sexual subject positions."

By using the term queer, one gives space for a multitude of identities and does not require people to identify within discrete categories. Additionally, the categories within the LGBTQ+ acronym itself are a western concept; referring to people who aren't heteronormative as 'queer' can include traditional sexualities and genders of other cultures (Kole, 2007).

Instructors

The College of Social Work has a myriad of people who teach courses. In this paper, 'instructor(s)' will be used to refer to any employee who teaches a course section. This includes community lecturers, staff, tenure-track/tenured faculty, and doctoral students. This language was used in the study to capture the various roles and backgrounds instructors can have in the College.

Cisgender

This term is used to describe someone who identifies exclusively with their gender assigned at birth (TSER, 2020). It does not, however, describe a person's gender expression or presentation, sexuality, or anatomy (TSER, 2020). 'Cisgender' is frequently abbreviated to 'Cis.'

Trans or Transgender

'Transgender' is often used to describe someone who does not identify wholely with their gender assigned at birth (TSER, 2020). 'Transgender' or 'trans' can be a specific identity (e.g., transgender male, trans woman) or a more general term to describe all gender identities that are not cisgender (e.g., nonbinary, genderqueer, etc.). These terms also do not say anything about a person's gender expression or presentation, sexuality, or anatomy (TSER, 2020). This paper will switch between trans, transgender, and gender minority when summarizing existing literature.

Heteronormative

According to the American Psychological Association (APA) heteronormative means, "the assumption that heterosexuality is the standard for defining normal sexual behavior and that male-female differences and gender roles are the natural and immutable essentials in normal human relations" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.). Heteronormativity is also often referred

to as heterosexism. In this paper, it will be used to describe systems, individuals, and curriculum content that assume heterosexual and cisgender identities are a default.

Misgender

To misgender a person is to incorrectly identify the gender of a person (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The definition used in this survey that was provided to participants was "...referred to you using a word, especially a pronoun or form of address, that does not correctly reflect the gender you identify with."

Background of the Problem

Discrimination affects queer people at a higher rate than other minoritized groups. As of 2014, LGBT Americans were the most targeted of any minoritized group for hate crimes (Mykhyalyshyn, 2016). In this broader context, there is an urgent need to create safe and inclusive spaces for queer students in higher education. In a 2018 study of LGBTQ college students (n=776), interpersonal microaggressions (e.g., demeaning comments, misgendering a person) were found to be a risk factor for depression and attempted suicide in cisgender LGBQ students, and for depression in trans students (Woodford et al., 2018). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students will often not disclose their sexual identity because of a hostile campus environment (Rankin, 2003). These students experience classroom settings that range from hostile to supportive (Longerbeam et al., 2007).

Compared to heterosexuals, LGBT individuals have poorer mental health, higher levels of substance use, and are more likely to report unmet mental healthcare needs (Burgess et al., 2008). These higher levels of mental health symptoms are related to, but not entirely the result of, experiencing both actual and perceived discrimination (Burgess et al., 2008). On college

campuses, this is supported in the findings of a survey of 506 binary and nonbinary trans-identifying undergraduate and graduate university students. It reported 85% of its participants stated they had mental health challenges (Goldberg et al., 2019). A study conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) highlighted the disparities in suicide behavior for trans-identifying individuals. The sample consisted of just over 120,000 adolescents ages 11-19. Almost 14% of all study participants reported a previous suicide attempt (Toomey & Syvertsen & Shramko, 2018). The trans-identifying participants had significantly higher rates of attempted suicide. Female to male-identifying adolescents had the highest rate at 50.8%, followed by those who did not identify as exclusively male or female (41.8%), male to female-identifying participants (29.9%), and questioning adolescents (27.9%) (Toomey & Syvertsen & Shramko, 2018). This is compared to cisgender participants, who reported at 17.6% for cisgender female adolescents and 9.8% for cisgender male adolescents (Toomey & Syvertsen & Shramko, 2018).

Not only do queer people experience increased mental health symptoms, but they encounter additional barriers to accessing services. A national study in 2015 of transgender adults by the National Center for Transgender Equality found that 23% of participants stated they did not see a doctor when they needed to due to fear of mistreatment related to being trans, and 33% did not see a doctor due to cost (James et al., 2016). A third of the participants who did access healthcare services reported having at least one negative experience related to being trans such as, “verbal harassment, refusal of treatment, or having to teach the health care provider about transgender people to receive appropriate care” (James et al., 2016, p. 93).

This problem is relevant to the field of social work. Social workers are embedded in healthcare and social services and are well-positioned to provide queer affirming care. To

improve trans clients' experiences, for example, social workers can ask them for their preferred name and pronouns (Meyer et al., 2019). This helps to prevent misgendering or using the incorrect name of a client. Misgendering or using the incorrect name can result in a client feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome in healthcare settings (Meyer et al., 2019). Queer people are clients in every system of care, not just queer-specific services and agencies, and therefore it is important for social workers to be competent in queer issues and affirming service delivery. By taking steps to avoid misgendering, social workers can make their practice more inclusive of queer clients.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gather information on BSSW and MSW student experiences at The College of Social Work at The Ohio State University as it relates to queer topics, with particular attention to pronoun usage. The study intended to learn more about the explicit and implicit curriculum in the program as it relates to pronoun usage, as well as gather data on how often instructors are asking for students' pronouns. The experiences and feelings of queer students were also a focus of this study.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as misgendering has several negative impacts on trans individuals (McLemore, 2014). Additionally, the inclusion of LGBT content in courses aids in normalizing these populations and reducing instructor bias (Case et al., 2009). Explicit curriculum components (such as LGBT content) and implicit curriculum components (such as school policies, available resources, and instructors' behavior) are important for student self-assessed readiness to practice with queer populations (Craig et al., 2014). Finally, LGBTQ+

students feeling supported in their identities has significant impacts on their readiness to be practicing social workers (Craig et al., 2015).

Conceptual Frame of Reference

Language is used as a primary interaction between people on a daily basis and both holds and expresses power. As Susan Gal writes, "the strongest form of power may well be the ability to define social reality, to impose visions of the world. Such visions are inscribed in language and, most importantly, enacted in interaction" (Gal, 1991, p. 197). Choosing to include topics in language, and the way one discusses those topics can affect social realities. This can change depending on the setting and context of the language, Thornborrow writes, "...representational accounts of the way things are in the world can also be more or less appropriate, more or less powerful, depending on the context in which they are produced…" (Thornborrow, 2013, p. 9). This is especially true of institutional settings (Thornborrow, 2013, p. 9). The concept of language holding power, especially within institutions, was a key frame of reference for this study and the focus on pronoun usage.

Other guiding concepts for this study include the impact of implicit and explicit curriculum. Implicit curriculum, also known as "hidden" curriculum, includes factors such as student interactions with faculty and peers, classroom climate, and overall campus environment. While the campus environment is not directly under the control of the College of Social Work, it does have an effect on its spaces and students. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) released its most recent Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) in 2015, and it defines implicit curriculum as "... the learning environment in which the explicit curriculum is presented" (CSWE, 2015, p.14). This consists of: "the program's commitment to diversity;

admissions policies and procedures; advisement, retention, and termination policies; student participation in governance; faculty; administrative structure; and resources" (CSWE, 2015). Explicit curriculum (e.g. courses, case studies, readings, lectures) is also a major part of the daily lives of social work students. The CSWE EPAS defines explicit curriculum as "... the explicit curriculum constitutes the program's formal educational structure and includes the courses and field education used for each of its program options" (CSWE, 2015, p. 11). These factors are critical to a student's development and educational experience.

The final major conceptual framework used in this study is readiness to practice. Readiness to practice can be defined as a student's ability to "take initiative, justify their judgments and actions and be responsible for their own workload under regular supervision" (Higham, 2006, p. 46). Indicators of readiness to practice include understanding and ability to enact a social work role, the ability to be self-reflective, interpersonal communication and relationships, and organizational practice (Howard et al., 2015). This study focuses heavily on interpersonal communication and relationships with respect to pronoun usage.

Aims/Research Questions

This study aimed to gain insight into BSSW and MSW students' experiences with queer issues—particularly pronoun usage—during their social work education. Four research questions guided this inquiry. (1) How is pronoun usage being addressed in the implicit and explicit curriculum?. (2) How frequently are students being misgendered by instructors?. (3) How confident do students feel when discussing queer topics and interacting with queer people or clients?. (4) Do queer students feel supported by the College of Social Work in their identities?

The study also aimed to give students the space to provide additional input regarding their experience with queer topics in the College of Social Work.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) values the dignity and worth of the person. The NASW Code of Ethics states: "[s]ocial workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity"; and "[s]ocial workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination" (NASW, 2018). The Code of Ethics also lists a commitment to this concept under ethical standard 1.05 Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity (NASW, 2018). Thus, it is an ethical responsibility of social workers to be culturally aware. As a socially marginalized group, queer people have developed their own culture and subcultures, and therefore queer issues would be included in this commitment to cultural competency (Logie et al., 2008).

The Ohio State University's College of Social Work is an accredited program through CSWE. In accordance with this accreditation, the College must follow specific educational guidelines and competencies. Under the 2015 EPAS, accredited programs are expected to place a focus on diversity and difference in both implicit and explicit curriculum, as well as program competencies. When describing the "dimensions of diversity" the EPAS includes gender, gender identity and expression, sex, and sexual orientation (CSWE, 2015). This is further explained under Implicit and Explicit Curriculum Accreditations 3.0—Diversity.

Accreditation Standard 3.03 states that an accredited program must describe "...specific plans to continually improve the learning environment to affirm and support persons with diverse identities" (CSWE, 2015, p. 14). Pronouns are an important part of a person's gender identity

and expression and can be used to affirm a person's identity. Therefore, asking for and using pronouns should be emphasized in a CSWE accredited program. The College of Social Work has a responsibility to create a safe and inclusive environment for students with queer students being no exception.

Implicit and Explicit Curriculum in Social Work Education related to Queer Populations

A supportive or positive classroom culture has been shown to have significant positive impacts on student learning outcomes (Browning et al., 2007). Examples of positive classroom culture include supporting students and effective handling of classroom conflict (Browning et al., 2007). Other factors related to supportive education on LGBTQ issues include the manner in which LGBTQ topics are handled, classroom discussion on social workers who identify as LGBTQ and struggles they may face, and students feeling supported around their LGBTQ identity (Craig et al., 2015). However, students indicate that discussion of the challenges facing LGBTQ social workers rarely or never occur in their social work programs (Craig et al., 2014).

Explicit curriculum in social work programs is often lacking in queer content. A national survey conducted by the CSWE of 299 social work programs concluded that 14% of these programs offered a course-specific to LGBT issues and 68% of the programs had diversity courses with LGBT specific content (Martin et al., 2009). Expanding on this, a study conducted by McInroy et al. in 2014 (n=106) in Canadian social work programs found that when queer content is included in the classroom, it is more likely to be focused on sexual minorities than trans or other gender minorities. Participants in this study also felt that content on sexual minorities was handled better by instructors than gender minority content (McInroy et al., 2014).

The inclusion of queer-specific explicit curriculum is important for students' readiness to practice. The higher the frequency of LGBTQ readings, the more likely students were to self-report higher levels of readiness to practice with LGBTQ individuals (Craig et al., 2014). These students supported the findings of the 2009 CSWE national survey; less than two-thirds of the respondents identified lesbian and gay material in their coursework, and significantly fewer respondents identified explicit curriculum on bisexual and transgender individuals (Craig et al., 2014).

The queer content that is included in courses is often focused around defining LGBT populations, as opposed to the different types of oppression this population can face (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). Instructors can also be hesitant to incorporate queer content outside of queer-specific courses. Frequently cited issues to introducing queer content include class materials that reinforce the gender binary and students' denial of gender and sexual privilege (Burke & Trumpy, 2016). Even when information on queer populations is included in the course material, it is not always handled well. The "Social Work Students Speak Out!" study (n=1,018) found that only 69.9% of students felt that sexual minority content was handled well, and only 38.2% felt transgender topics were handled appropriately (Craig et al., 2015). However, these challenges can be overcome. Burke and Trumpy (2016) wrote, "...highlighting exceptions to predominant social patterns and incorporating intersectionality in class readings and discussions can address these stumbling blocks" (p. 273).

Pronoun Usage

A large portion of the implicit curriculum in the classroom is student-faculty interaction. In the College of Social Work at Ohio State, an emphasis is placed on this interaction and the

first session of each class is usually dedicated to introductions and getting to know one another. Including personal pronouns in that introduction allows students to feel respected and can prevent emotional harm (Bryn Mawr, n.d.). Gender is important to one's sense of self, and incorrectly gendering someone can lead to feelings of disrespect, alienation, and/or dysphoria (Bryn Mawr, n.d.). The incorrect usage of pronouns, or misgendering, has negative effects on the individual. Trans individuals who experience misgendering have more negative affect and self-stigma as well as experiencing less authenticity and lower levels of identity strength and coherence (McLemore, 2014). Misgendering also creates a barrier to accessing healthcare and can cause a client to feel unwelcome and stigmatized (Meyer et al., 2019).

Introducing oneself with personal pronouns is considered best practice to support queer students, and several social work programs across the country have adopted it as standard procedure and have made publications in support of the practice; these include the Bryn Mawr and Smith Schools of Social Work, as well as Duke University's Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies Department (Bryn Mawr, n.d.; Clarkson, n.d.; Shlasko et al., 2017). Recently, there has been a push at Ohio State to include preferred pronouns on email signatures and business cards (The Ohio State University, n.d.). Introducing oneself with personal pronouns as a cisgender person can also be a way to advocate for the inclusion of queer people; it allows people to have space for self-expression and respects an individual's control over their own identity (Pronoun Usage in the Classroom: Respecting the Dignity and Worth of Students, 2019).

Support for using personal pronouns, especially nonbinary pronouns such as 'they/them,' has been increasing in recent years. Merriam-Webster added the singular "they" into the dictionary as a personal pronoun in September of 2019, and shortly after declared 'they' to be the

Word of the Year (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Subsequently, the American Psychological Association (APA), which many social work programs use as a default formatting and referencing style, declared that the singular 'they' would no longer be discouraged in academic writing and would be within APA guidelines (APA, 2019). Previously, the singular 'they' was not seen as a legitimate practice in academic settings, but this mindset is in the process of changing.

Social Workers' Readiness to Practice with Queer Populations

While research of student self-assessed readiness to practice is still emerging in social work education, a study of social work students (n=44) in 2002 determined that 41% of students do not feel adequately prepared to practice (Mathias-Williams & Thomas, 2002). A more recent study conducted by Craig et al. (2015) on social work students' self-assessed readiness to practice found similar results of students rating themselves inadequately prepared to work with LGBTQ populations.

Implicit and explicit curriculum have implications on student readiness to practice with queer clients. Implicit factors that affect readiness to practice include how LGBQ topics are handled by instructors in classrooms, classroom discussion specifically about challenges faced by LGBQ people, and knowledge of a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity (Craig et al., 2014). Explicit curriculum is also important for student readiness to practice. Students are more likely to rate themselves highly in terms of readiness to practice with LGBTQ populations when LGBTQ readings are assigned with greater frequency (Craig et al., 2014). Additionally, for LGBTQ-identifying students, their feelings of support

surrounding their queer identity is important for their self assessed readiness to practice with LGBTQ populations (Craig, et al., 2014).

Chapter Summary

Both the NASW and CSWE emphasize social workers being competent regarding a range of diversity topics, including sexual orientation and gender identity. CSWE goes on to state that this competency in diversity should be extended to the implicit and explicit curriculum of social work programs. Implicit and explicit curriculum related to queer topics impacts a student's readiness to practice with queer populations. For LGBTQ students, their feelings of support in their identity affect their well being. Supporting a queer person in their identity includes correctly gendering them and using their chosen pronouns. Failing to do so and misgendering a person can lead to negative consequences for the individual and can be a barrier to receiving services.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods online survey was administered to BSSW and MSW students enrolled in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University. The survey was designed to gain insight into all students' experiences in the College of Social Work as it relates to queer issues and pronoun usage, as well as queer students' experiences within their program. The survey collected demographics, data on implicit and explicit curricula related to pronoun usage, data on self-reported ability to use pronouns, and participant self-reported readiness to practice with queer individuals. For queer students specifically, data was collected on their feeling of support

in their identity within the College of Social Work and how they believed the College could better support queer students.

The survey included quantitative questions (e.g., multiple-choice, Likert scales), and short-response qualitative questions. Most questions were optional, with the only required responses being the agreement to consent and the inclusion criteria questions regarding participants' sought degree, their year in the program, the campus they were attending, and whether or not they identified as queer.

An online survey was selected for this study due to its low cost, convenience, and participant anonymity. When working with marginalized communities, online instruments are especially effective and can provide researchers with increased access to said communities (McInroy, 2016). The survey was built in Qualtrics which the researcher had access to due to their affiliation with The Ohio State University. Therefore, building the survey came at no additional cost. Participants were able to take the survey from anywhere they had access to the internet, and therefore the survey was able to be sent to a larger sample at less inconvenience to the participant. This also allowed regional campus students and online students to participate. Additionally, participants were not asked for any personally identifiable data in the main survey. The only identifiable data collected was in a separate survey to be considered for the incentive (see below). Through this method, there was no way to trace an individual's response to their identifiable data. This anonymity allowed for a more ethical survey process (McInroy, 2016).

Population and Sample Design

The population for this study consists of BSSW and MSW students in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Inclusion Criteria: participants were required to be: (1) over the age of 18 and (2) enrolled in the BSSW program or MSW program at The Ohio State University. The sampling method for this survey is a non-probability convenience sample, and a full sampling frame of all members of the population (i.e., all currently enrolled BSSW and MSW students) was available.

Data Collection Procedures

The online survey was distributed to all BSSW and MSW students in the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University via their university email account. Ms. Jennie Babcock, the Director of the College's BSSW program, sent the recruitment email through a listserv of all students enrolled in the BSSW or MSW programs. Students received three subsequent reminder emails, each a week apart, for a total of four contacts. To aid in recruitment, participants could opt to join a raffle for 1 of 30 $25 Amazon e-gift cards. The chances of winning were approximately 1 in 40.

The survey was open January 17th, 2020 through February 7th, 2020. The study received approval from The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board (ID: 2019B0523) and participants reviewed and accepted a consent form at the beginning of the survey. In both the survey itself and the recruitment materials for the survey, "LGBTQ+" was used instead of "queer" to be as clear as possible and to avoid potential confusion among participants. Therefore, when discussing the survey results, LGBTQ+ will be used.

Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative Data

All instruments were created for the purposes of this study. See Appendix I for the full survey.

Demographic Information

Participants were required to share some demographic information and could provide additional information if they were comfortable doing so. The required information included the degree program they were enrolled in, what year of their program they were in, the campus they attended (including online students), and whether or not they identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. This information was required, as it was necessary for the analyses and allowed the researcher to gain a better perspective of students' progress through their academic program. The question of whether or not the participant identified as LGBTQ+ was required as there were questions later in the survey that were specific to participants who identified as LGBTQ+. If a participant selected "I would prefer not to say" for this question, they completed the LGBTQ+ version of the survey.

The optional demographic information was focused on the participant's identity. For the purposes of this study, participants were only asked about identities relevant to the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., gender identity, sexuality, and romantic attraction). This was decided so that the survey would remain minimally intrusive. Participants were asked to provide their gender identity as an open response question with an option for "I would prefer not to say." This was done to allow participants freedom of choice when it comes to their own identity. The rest of the optional demographic questions included multiple-choice options as well as an open response question if a participant's identity was not one of the closed-choice options. These questions also included an "I would prefer not to say" option. The remaining demographic questions related to gender identity asked for the participant's sex assigned at birth, sexual and/or romantic orientation/identity, and what pronouns they currently used. Participants were also asked to

identify their sexuality or sexualities and romantic attraction or attractions. They were able to select as many options as they wanted, and there was a short answer that participants could choose if their identity was not listed.

Implicit and Explicit Curriculum

A section asked participants about pronoun usage and how it appeared in the explicit and implicit curriculum of their social work programs. First, participants were asked to recall how many of their instructors asked students for their pronouns during introductions both in the current semester (Spring 2020) and the previous semester (Fall 2019). Participants were provided with a drop-down box for each semester with choices ranging from 0-5+ to indicate the number of instructors who asked for students' pronouns. This question was asked to gather information on the frequency of instructors asking for pronouns.

The next question asked participants if an instructor had ever explained why introducing oneself with pronouns is important. If they selected "Yes," they were then prompted with an open response question asking them to summarize what the instructor said. These questions were asked to see if instructors were asking for pronouns but not explaining why they were doing so. It also allowed information to be gathered on what messages were being conveyed to students about pronoun usage.

Finally, participants were asked if pronoun usage had been introduced in the class material in any of their classes. Participants were provided with examples of class material including readings, presentations, and textbooks. This question was asked to gather data on how pronoun usage is showing up in the explicit curriculum.

Misgendering

Participants were then asked if they had ever been misgendered by an instructor. Misgendering was defined to participants as "referred to you using a word, especially a pronoun or form of address, that does not correctly reflect the gender you identify with." If participants responded "Yes," they were asked a follow-up question asking whether or not the instructor corrected the mistake of misgendering. These questions were asked to gain insight into the frequency of misgendering of students by instructors, and how the instructors were handling the situation after misgendering someone.

Participants were then asked if they had ever seen an instructor misgender a peer, and if they had, to report whether or not it was a consistent problem. Questions were added from an outside perspective as it was assumed that the majority of students would not have experienced being misgendered personally and therefore asking only about personal experience would result in an insufficient amount of data. Asking about the consistency of the misgendering was again to assess how instructors are handling the situation when they misgender a student.

Readiness to Practice

This section consisted of 5-point Likert scales asking participants to select their level of agreement with statements about pronoun use and their self-perceived social work competency with LGBTQ+ clients. The steps on the scale were as follows: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. A higher score indicates a greater degree of agreement with the statement. The first question asked participants to select their level of agreement with the statement: "I understand the purpose of introducing myself with my

pronouns." This question was asked to see if students understood why pronoun usage is important.

The following two questions asked participants if they feel confident in using a person's pronouns in a conversation with them and in conversation about them. This distinction was made to see if the participants were more or less comfortable using a person's pronouns when the person in question was present in the conversation. Participants were then asked if they knew what to do if they misgendered someone or if a peer misgendered someone. Being able to correct a mistake is an important part of using a person's pronouns, and therefore these questions were asked.

Participants were then asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement: "I will be able to competently work with LGBTQ+ clients in my future career." Addressing clients appropriately is needed to maintain rapport, as well as many other considerations. This question was included to gain information on participants' feelings of their self-perceived readiness to engage competently in practice with the LGBTQ+ community.

The final question that all participants received was an open response question that asked the participant's thoughts on how the College could better prepare students to work with LGBTQ+ clients. This question was to allow students to give feedback and any suggestions on how their education regarding LGBTQ+ issues could be improved. It also allowed participants to provide information that is potentially unrelated to pronoun usage, but still pertinent to their education on LGBTQ+ issues.

LGBTQ+-Identifying Participants

Participants who responded "Yes" or "I would prefer not to say" in the demographic question asking whether or not participants identified as LGBTQ+ had an additional question on the 5-point Likert Scale. These participants were asked to describe their agreement with the following statement: "I currently feel supported by the College of Social Work in my LGBTQ+ identity." This was then followed by an open response question that allowed them to provide feedback on how the College could be better supporting its LGBTQ+ students. These questions were added to allow LGBTQ+-identifying students to provide suggestions based on their own personal experience. It also allowed members of the queer community to identify what is best for their community.

Positionality Statement

It is important to note that the researcher's positionality has the potential to have an effect on their research. Identities that are relevant to this work include the researcher identifying as queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming. In terms of experiences, the researcher is currently a BSSW student at the College of Social Work, is a member of the LGBTQ+ Ad Hoc Committee for the College, has been the Co-President of Out In Social Work (the College of Social Work's LGBTQ+ student organization) for the past two years, and has presented training on pronoun usage to instructors and administrators. Thus, the researcher had been a student leader within the College on queer issues, which may have impacted their perceptions of the curriculum and classroom climate.

Additionally, the researcher has experienced being misgendered in the classroom during their social work program and has been treated negatively in response to their gender identity

and pronouns. These experiences have the potential to create bias. Thus the researcher felt it was important to reflect on their own positionality to this study in regards to their own identities and prior experiences. They did this through intentional self-reflection as well as ongoing consultation with their thesis supervisor.

Analyses

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive univariate analysis. Demographic data were cleaned. Participants were grouped based on similar sexual identities for ease of reporting. Those groupings were 'Heterosexual,' 'Queer,' and 'Multiple.' Participants who selected 'Straight/heterosexual' were grouped into the 'Heterosexual' category. The 'Queer' group included any participant who reported a single nonheteronormative sexual identity and 'Multiple' included participants who listed multiple sexualities and/or romantic attractions.

For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed. Thematic analysis can be described as "a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). The researcher moved from a micro perspective of the data to a macro perspective. The researcher started by reading through all of the qualitative responses for each question and looked for commonalities, making notes of each individual response and color-coding the response. The themes were then constructed based on the commonalities in the responses, expanding to the larger data set to include multiple responses under the same theme. The researcher continued this iterative process until all responses were filed into a theme. Through this process, the researcher consulted with colleagues and had debriefing sessions about the data. Through these sessions, additional perspectives were gained that enhanced the rigor of the analysis (Maher et al., 2018)

Chapter Summary

Participants were required to provide their degree program, year, campus, and whether or not they identify as LGBTQ+. Optional demographic information included sexual and romantic attractions, gender identity, sex assigned at birth, and the pronouns they use. These questions were optional to be less invasive to the participant. Questions were then asked about implicit and explicit curriculum, misgendering, and competency with LGBTQ+ topics. Participants that identified as LGBTQ+ were asked additional questions about their feelings of support and how they felt the College of Social Work could better support its LGBTQ+ students. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive univariate analysis and the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis.

Chapter IV: Results

Of the total population of 1,200 BSSW and MSW students, 243 participated in the survey. Of this initial sample, only 235 had partial or complete responses; therefore the eight responses with no data were removed from the dataset. Thus, the survey response rate was approximately 19.58%

Participant Demographics

The majority of participants were BSSW students (62.00%) while the rest were seeking an MSW (38.00%). Of the BSSW students, there were participants from every year of the program (see Table 1). The largest group of participants fell under the fourth-year category (40.00%), with additional representation of third-year students (26.20%)--indicating greater participation from students who had completed at least half of their degrees. There were fewer participants in the earlier years of their program, though a substantial minority (29.70%) were in

years one or two. Of the MSW students, most participants were first-year students (MSW I), with fewer second-year (MSW II) and Advanced Standing Alternative Plan students (MSW ASAP). MSW ASAP students are students completing the MSW program in only three semesters To be eligible for the accelerated program, they must have completed a BSSW prior to the program (College of Social Work, n.d.). The majority of participants studied at the Columbus campus (65.81%), with a close to even distribution of participants coming from various branch campuses (5-6% per branch campus). There were also 30 (12.82%) online students. See Table 1 for a full breakdown of this data.

Table 1

Participant Academic Demographics

Characteristic	n	%
Degree (n=235)		
BSSW	145	61.70
MSW	90	38.29
BSSW (n=145)		
First-year	21	14.50
Second-year	22	15.20
Third-year	38	26.20
Fourth-year	58	40.00
Fifth-year or more	6	4.10
MSW (n=89)		
MSW I	40	44.90
MSW II	29	32.60
MSW ASAP	20	22.50
Campus (n=234)		
Columbus	154	65.81
Lima	11	4.70
Mansfield	12	5.13
Marion	14	5.98
Newark	13	5.56
Online	30	12.82

Only about a fourth of the participants (24.03%) identified as LGBTQ+ when explicitly asked, while three preferred to not disclose this information (see Table 2). The rest of the participants did not identify as LGBTQ+. However, it is critical to highlight that the specific gender and sexual identities reported by participants were not consistent with this finding. Specifically, almost 40% of participants reported having one or more sexuality which falls under the queer umbrella, 15% more than those who explicitly identified as LGBTQ+. The vast majority of participants (97.01%) identified as cisgender, with only six identifying as one or more gender that is not cismale or cis female and one participant preferring not to disclose their gender. For the purposes of this study, these seven participants were considered trans-identifying, as their identities fall underneath the trans umbrella of identities.

The sample was overwhelmingly composed of female participants (85.47%). This is reflected in the participants' sex assigned at birth, with the majority of participants selecting "female." No participants selected "intersex" or "I would prefer not to say" options. Again, when asked to report the pronoun they used, most participants selected "She/Her/Hers". Only three used "They/Them/Theirs" and four used multiple pronouns. See Table 2 for a full breakdown of the responses to the identity questions.

Table 2

Participant Identity Demographics

Identity	n	%
LGBTQ+ (n=233)		
No	174	74.68
Yes	56	24.03
I would prefer not to say	3	1.29
Gender (n=234)		
Female	200	85.47
Male	27	11.54
Trans	6	2.56
I would prefer not to say	1	0.43
Sex Assigned at Birth (n=233)		
Female	207	88.84
Male	26	11.16
Sexuality (n=234)		
Heterosexual	148	63.24
Queer	50	21.37
Multiple	36	15.38
Pronouns (n=233)		
She/Her/Hers	199	85.41
He/Him/His	26	11.16
They/Them/Theirs	3	1.29
Multiple	4	1.72
I would prefer not to say	1	0.43

Implicit and Explicit Curriculum

In the Fall 2019 semester, a third of participants (33.04%) did not have even one professor ask for students to introduce themselves with their pronouns. This percentage increased in the Spring 2020 semester to 52.63% of students, indicating a decrease in the proportion of students being asked to use pronouns in their classroom introductions. On average, in the Fall 2019 semester students had 1.41 instructors ask for their pronouns and in the Spring 2020 semester had 1.11 instructors ask.

Table 3

Number of Instructors who Asked for Pronouns During Introductions

Number of Instructors	n	%
Fall 2019 (n=230)		
0	76	33.04
1	73	31.74
2	31	13.48
3	22	9.57
4	16	6.96
5+	12	5.22
Spring 2020 (n=228)		
0	120	52.63
1	44	19.30
2	21	9.21
3	16	7.02
4	15	6.58
5+	12	5.26

When asked if an instructor had ever explained why introducing oneself with their pronouns is important (n=216), 72 selected “No” (33.33%) and 144 selected “Yes” (66.67%). Those participants who selected “Yes” were asked to summarize what the instructor explained. Of those who selected “Yes”81.94% (n=118) provided a response to the short answer question. The responses were categorized into the following themes: correct identification (27.97%), inclusivity (21.19%), respect (18.64%), multiple (13.56%), normalization (7.63%), other (8.47%), and don’t remember (2.54%).

Correct identification consisted of responses which indicated the instructor had mentioned not making assumptions about someone’s identity, avoiding making mistakes when referring to someone, or made a statement similar to “...correctly identify someone.” Participant 17 (female, straight/heterosexual, BSSW) wrote, “Introducing yourself with pronouns is important because it is important to be properly identified and removes confusion in mis-identifying someone.” Other responses echoed this sentiment; that asking for and introducing oneself with pronouns is important as it allows space for people to state how they would like to be addressed and it helps prevent misgendering.

The inclusivity theme consisted of responses which included the word “inclusion” or “inclusivity,” or if the participant discussed “safe spaces.” Participant 7 (female, straight/heterosexual, BSSW) summed this theme up well, writing: “[t]o make sure everyone feels welcome [and] included... [It] creates a safe space.”

Similarly, responses about respect stated including pronouns in an introduction allows one to be respectful of others’ pronouns and identities. For example, Participant 98 (female, straight/heterosexual, BSSW) responded, “They said it is important to respect everyone’s

identity and using the proper pronouns is one way to do so." Responses in this theme focused on respectful communication and noted the sharing of pronouns as a means of doing so.

Many responses discussed normalizing pronouns and reducing stigma. The response of Participant 57 encapsulates this well. They wrote, "If the only people to introduce themselves with their pronouns are transgender/gender-queer, this can be ostracizing and can be unsafe in some settings. Introducing yourself with pronouns normalizes it for people of all genders and makes others feel more comfortable in sharing their pronouns…"

The multiple theme consists simply of responses that fit into multiple of the other themes and could not be solely placed in one category. The 'don't remember' theme included responses that plainly stated they did not remember what their instructor explained about pronoun usage. An example from this theme comes from Participant 130 (female, gay, MSW). They responded, "Inclusivity and respect. However, this was only in my in person classes. Online classes have not done this." This was one of several responses that mentioned their online classes had not included pronoun usage. Finally, responses that did not fit into a pre-existing category were coded as 'other'. This theme also included responses that were incoherent or that did not answer the prompt.

In terms of explicit curriculum, participants were asked if pronoun usage had been included in their class materials. Of the 223 responses, 85 selected "No" (38.12%) and 138 selected "Yes" (61.88%).

Misgendering

Participants were asked whether or not they had ever been misgendered by an instructor, as well as if they had witnessed it happen to a peer. If the participant answered "Yes," to either

question, a follow-up queried if the instructor corrected the mistake/if the misgendering of peers was a consistent issue. When asked if they had been misgendered (n=224), 96.88% of participants responded “No.” Of the 3.13% (n=7) who responded “Yes,” four (57.14%) stated the instructor did not correct themselves, and three (42.86%) responded that the instructor did correct the error. All seven participants who had been misgendered identified under the trans umbrella in the demographic section. Participants were then asked if they had seen a peer be misgendered (n=223). 180 participants responded “No” (80.72%). Of those who had seen misgendering of a peer (19.29%, n=43), two-thirds said it was not a consistent issue (67.44%, n=29) while the remaining third indicated that it was an ongoing issue (32.56%, n=14).

Table 4.1

Pronoun Competence and Readiness to Practice Statements

Level of agreement	n	%
I feel that I understand the purpose of introducing myself with my pronouns. (n=225)		
Strongly Disagree	2	0.89
Disagree	1	0.44
Neither Agree nor Disagree	14	6.22
Agree	70	31.11
Strongly Agree	139	61.78
I can use a person's pronouns correctly in a conversation with them. (n=224)		
Strongly Disagree	2	0.89
Disagree	1	0.45
Neither Agree nor Disagree	10	4.46
Agree	90	40.18
Strongly Agree	121	54.02
I can use a person's pronouns correctly in a conversation about them. (n=225)		
Strongly Disagree	1	0.44
Disagree	3	1.33
Neither Agree nor Disagree	18	8.00
Agree	89	39.56
Strongly Agree	114	50.67

Table 4.2

Competency Statements Continued

Level of Agreement	n	%
I know what to do if I accidentally use the incorrect pronouns with an individual. (n=225)		
Strongly Disagree	2	0.89
Disagree	27	12.00
Neither Agree nor Disagree	27	12.00
Agree	94	41.78
Strongly Agree	75	33.34
I am knowledgeable enough about pronoun usage to correct someone if they misgender a peer. (n=226)		
Strongly Disagree	4	1.77
Disagree	16	7.08
Neither Agree nor Disagree	30	13.27
Agree	93	41.15
Strongly Agree	83	36.73
I will be able to competently work with LGBTQ+ clients in my future career. (n=225)		
Strongly Disagree	1	0.44
Disagree	6	2.67
Neither Agree nor Disagree	19	8.44
Agree	84	37.33
Strongly Agree	115	51.11

Competency

See Tables 4.1 and 4.2 for a full breakdown of each question's responses. Scoring the levels of agreement from zero to four, with zero being "Strongly Disagree" and four being "Strongly Agree," the average (M) and standard deviations (SD) of each Likert Scale question were calculated—see Table 5.

Table 5

Average and Standard Deviation of Likert Scale Responses

Statement	M	SD
I feel that I understand the purpose of introducing myself with my pronouns. (n=225)	3.52	0.71
I can use a person's pronouns correctly in a conversation with them. (n=224)	3.46	0.69
I can use a person's pronouns correctly in a conversation about them. (n=225)	3.39	0.73
I know what to do if I accidentally use the incorrect pronouns with an individual. (n=225)	2.95	1.01
I am knowledgeable enough about pronoun usage to correct someone if they misgender a peer. (n=226)	3.04	0.97
I will be able to competently work with LGBTQ+ clients in my future career. (n=225)	3.62	0.79

Overall, participants were less comfortable with correcting a mistake they had made regarding pronouns than with using pronouns generally. When asked if they knew what to do upon misgendering someone, the majority (75.11%) selected either "Strongly Agree" or "Agree." The remaining participants (24.89%) selected either a neutral or negative response. This was more than double the percentage of neutral or negative responses in the previous three questions on pronoun competence (see Table 4.1). Scores were slightly more positive when asked if they could correct someone else if they misgendered a peer with 77.88% responding either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree."

Finally, participants were asked if they felt they will be able to work competently with LGBTQ+ clients in their future social work careers. When asked to rate this question on a Likert Scale, again a large majority answered positively (88.44%). Participants were then asked to provide suggestions via short-answer responses on how the College of Social Work could better prepare them to work with LGBTQ+ clients (n=140). Prevalent suggestions consisted of additional course material, attention to pronoun usage, guest speakers, and a queer specific course.

Responses that discussed including more LGBTQ+ concepts in course material (i.e. additions to the explicit curriculum) comprised 40.00% of participants' responses (n=56). Many participants felt as though LGBTQ+ topics could be better integrated into non-LGBTQ+ specific courses through class examples or case studies. For example, Participant 59 (female, pansexual, BSSW) wrote:

> "More diversity in scenarios and examples completed in class. Also, including LGBTQ+ in all other areas of specialization because... you will encounter LGBTQ+ clients and treating them as their own population that you can choose to work with or choose not to is not preparing us for the fact that we will be working with members of this community at some point."

Participant 234 (female, bisexual, BSSW) said, “I think it’s exposure. We have a lot of case studies with heterosexual couples, but not many with LGBTQIA couples.” These opinions are consistent with the quantitative question on class materials, as approximately 40% of respondents stated they had not had pronoun usage included in their class materials

Despite the majority of positive responses to the Likert Scale questions on pronoun usage, responses discussing increasing awareness and education on how to use pronouns was the second-largest category. In total, 39 (27.86%) of respondents included pronoun usage in their answers. Many of the participants felt as though this emphasis on pronoun usage should come from the instructors. Participant 103 (female, straight/heterosexual, MSW) expressed, “I think professors could start off by asking students to identify which pronouns they prefer during introductions and be good examples by using the appropriate pronouns.” This response supports the quantitative findings of the lack of asking for pronouns at the start of the semester for many participants.

Participant 125 (female, straight/heterosexual, MSW) felt as though improving using others’ pronouns was a matter of personal health:

> “... I think that the College can help students be prepared by emphasizing the importance of this on mental health and overall wellbeing, and emphasize that this is something we must always practice humility with and be willing to learn and work on, always. I know that I am not perfect with it and getting it correct or asking for pronouns all the time. But I want to be better and I think the CSW should continue to give tools on how to do so.”

This response, and the overall desire of many participants to see an increased emphasis on pronoun usage, contradicts the results from the earlier quantitative questions. Despite participants’ self-reported high confidence in their understanding of and ability to use pronouns, almost 30% of the qualitative responses for this question were focused on pronoun usage.

Eight (5.71%) of participants stated it would be helpful to have experts on LGBTQ+ issues as well as members of the community to come to classes and better inform them. Participant 46 (female, bisexual, BSSW) wrote,

> "... [an] LGBTQ focused organization that does policy advocacy and works with the LGBTQ population could come and present in classes to make for a more engaging and relevant discussion and take the burden off of LGBTQ students to defend themselves or being coined as spokespersons for the community- which is exhausting and places an undue burden on students."

Others suggested potentially partnering with the Student Life Multicultural Center that has a specialist dedicated to LGBTQ+ students.

Interestingly, seven (5%) participants responded that it would be helpful to have an LGBTQ+-focused social work course. While this doesn't seem like a large percentage, it is important to note as the College of Social Work offers multiple queer-specific courses.

The other theme included responses that did not fit into any other theme, were incoherent or did not answer the prompt. Examples of responses in this theme include Participant 149's (female, straight/heterosexual, MSW) response, "offer more opportunities to work/volunteer specifically with this population" and Participant 94's (Gender not reported, bisexual, MSW) response, "they almost all assume we are straight." Participants who did not have a suggestion at the time of the survey were placed in the unsure theme.

It is notable that in response to being asked to provide suggestions, some participants (10%, n=14) felt that changes were not necessary, and that the College of Social Work was already doing an adequate job to prepare students to work with LGBTQ+ clients. They felt as though the college is inclusive to all, and does a successful job of focusing on the importance of diversity—including LGBTQ+ identities. Participant 36 (female, bisexual, BSSW) wrote,

"[a]lmost every class in some way has related back to working with diverse populations and stresses the importance of sensitivity toward others." This sentiment is backed up by the quantitative questions around competence, as the vast majority of respondents rated themselves highly in terms of their competence in working with LGBTQ+ people.

LGBTQ+-Identifying Participants

Participants who selected "Yes" or "I would prefer not to say" when asked if they identified as LGBTQ+, were asked the following questions. First, they were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "I currently feel supported by the College of Social Work in my LGBTQ+ identity." The responses are listed in Table 6. The majority of respondents selected a positive response (71%), with a fourth of participants selecting a neutral response. Zero participants selected strongly disagree, and only two selected a negative response. The average response score (M) was 3.09 with a SD of 0.92.

Table 6

Feelings of Support Among LGBTQ+ Students

Level of Agreement	n	%
Responses (n=55)		
Strongly Disagree	0	0.00
Disagree	2	3.64
Neither Agree nor Disagree	14	25.45
Agree	16	29.09
Strongly Agree	23	41.82

This question was followed by asking LGBTQ+ participants how they felt the College could better support LGBTQ+ students. The qualitative responses to this question were categorized into these themes: pronoun usage, education, currently sufficient, classes, and unsure. In total, there were 35 responses to this question. See Table 7 for the numeric breakdown of the themes.

Suggestions including pronoun usage highlighted the need for professors to ask for them in introductions, as well as the need for pronoun training or general pronoun resources. For example, Participant 57 (female, bisexual, BSSW) wrote, “Making the usage of pronouns a mandatory requirement by instructors. I've also seen many times in lecture slides a lecturer will use ‘he/she’ rather than ‘them,’ or a more inclusive alternative…” Several participants suggested removing “he/she” from syllabi and lecture slides in favor of a more inclusive “they.”

Several participants felt supporting LGBTQ+ students came down to education. Responses discussed having a class module focused on LGBTQ+ ideas and issues and increased education on LGBTQ+ topics in general. Participant 148 (male, gay and queer, MSW) pointed out that currently the onus is placed on LGBTQ+ students to educate others. They wrote, “sometimes I feel like members of the LGBTQ+ population are asked to carry the brunt of educating peers on all things pertaining to affirmative social work practice. I feel like this can be an unfair burden to place on an already/sometimes vulnerable population.”

Many participants indicated that they believed the College is currently doing enough for its LGBTQ+ students,grouped into currently sufficient. Others asked for an LGBTQ+-specific course. Finally, some respondents indicated that they were unsure of what the College could be doing to better support LGBTQ+ students.

Table 7

How Could the College of Social Work Better Support its LGBTQ+ Students

Themes	n	%
Responses (n=35)		
Pronoun Usage	16	45.71
Education	6	17.14
Currently Sufficient	5	14.29
Classes	2	5.71
Unsure	6	17.14

Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendation

Summary of Findings

Across all of the short-response questions, nine participants suggested that the College should offer a course on LGBTQ+ issues and topics. In terms of pronoun usage, a larger number of participants had zero instructors ask for their pronouns during introductions this semester (Spring 2020) than last semester (Fall 2020). In the Spring 2020 semester, over half (52.63%) of students had no instructor ask for their pronouns during introductions. Additionally, approximately one-third of participants had never received any explanation as to why introducing oneself with pronouns is important. Of the seven trans-identifying participants, all had experienced being misgendered in their social work program. In general, participants felt competent when it came to pronoun usage and working with LGBTQ+ clients. However, participants felt less comfortable when it came to correcting themselves or others when misgendering occurs.

Conclusions

The rates of misgendering of trans students and the desire of non-LGBTQ+ students to learn more about pronoun usage supports the move towards using pronouns during introductions as a best practice in explicit curricula for social work education. Some social work programs have started including pronouns as a standard part of introductions (Bryn Mawr, n.d.; Shlasko et al., 2017), and responses indicate this trend should continue. At The Ohio State University, adding pronouns to email signatures is now within brand guidelines (The Ohio State University, n.d.). However, further emphasis on transgender topics and explicit use of pronouns in the classroom is likely necessary to reduce rates of misgendering.

The underemphasis on trans issues in explicit and implicit curriculum in this study and others (Burke & Trumpy, 2016; Craig et al., 2014; Craig et al., 2015; McInroy et al., 2014), results in misgendering of students which may be at least partly due to the fact that trans students are a smaller minority than students with other queer sexualities. In this study, only six (2.56%) participants identified as trans while 36.75% of the participants identified as one or more queer sexuality. However, despite being a student minority group, what the existing research makes clear is that misgendering is actively harmful to trans students, leading to experiences such as negative affect, less authenticity, less identity strength and coherence, and more self-stigma (McLemore, 2014).

Additionally, almost 40% of participants reported having one or more sexuality which falls under the queer umbrella, 15% more than those who explicitly identified as LGBTQ+. This is significant as only students who identified as LGBTQ+ received questions about their feelings of support in their identity and how they believed the college could better support LGBTQ+ students. This a significant portion of participants that could've changed the results of these questions.

Overall, students in the College of Social Work at Ohio State feel supported in their LGBTQ+ identities and believe themselves to be ready to practice with this population. This is in contrast to previous literature on student self-assessed readiness to practice (Mathias-Williams & Thomas, 2002; Craig et al., 2015). However, studies of medical students have shown that students tend to overestimate their readiness to practice and that self-assessments are not always reliable when compared to external evaluations (Lai & Teng, 2011; Langendyk, 2006). Many participants cited the College's focus on cultural competency for their faith in the ability to work

with LGBTQ+ clients. However, other colleges at Ohio State that do not teach the concepts of cultural competency as explicitly as the College of Social Work may have lower levels of confidence in LGBTQ+ concepts including pronoun usage. Additionally, all of the trans participants had experienced being misgendered and that is likely not an experience unique to the College of Social Work.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that should be taken into account when considering the findings. The survey was conducted at a single point in time (mid-January 2020 to early February 2020) and therefore gives only a snapshot of the student experience within the College. It also only captures information from those currently enrolled in a BSSW or MSW program at Ohio State. Therefore, the results do not reflect the experience of past or future students, or current students taking social work courses as non-degree electives. The survey also asked about the participants' experience at the beginning of the previous semester, which was several months ago at the point when the survey was administered. This may have resulted in misremembering of information and inaccurate results.

One must also take self-selection bias into account. Many students who identify as queer, are passionate about queer issues, or have had a bad experience with pronoun usage or being misgendered themselves, would be potentially more likely to take this survey. This may have resulted in receiving a disproportionate amount of data from queer students.

Finally, this study only captures the student perspective on pronoun usage. To get a more complete view of pronoun usage in the college, data would need to be collected from instructors and administrators as well. Additionally, the survey was only taken by a fraction of the total

population of students and a substantial majority of participants are from the Columbus Campus. Therefore, it is only a small look at the student experience, that is mostly focused on the Columbus student experience. This study is also specific to social work students at The Ohio State University. Therefore, the data has low generalizability to other programs or universities within the United States.

Implications & Recommendations

In summation, the explicit and implicit curricula of the College insufficiently includes pronoun usage. Over half of students in the Spring 2020 semester did not have an instructor ask for their pronouns during introductions, and just under 40% of participants did not have pronoun usage included in their coursework. Additionally, all seven trans-identifying students had experienced being misgendered by an instructor. Despite the low levels of pronoun usage in the curricula, students feel confident overall using pronouns and working with queer clients. However, they feel significantly less confident when correcting a mistake when using pronouns. Finally, a majority of queer students feel supported by the College in their identities.

The study findings generate several implications and recommendations. Firstly, a greater emphasis on pronoun usage would begin to address existing insufficiencies in the explicit and implicit curricula, as well as misgendering in College of Social Work—improving the experience of transgender students. This is reflected in the data; the only students who reported being personally misgendered by an instructor were those who identified within the trans umbrella of identities. Increasing education about gender minorities may improve these students' experiences.

Students also specifically requested more resources on gender minorities and pronoun usage. Common suggestions included pronoun trainings, guest speakers who are well versed in queer issues and having instructors be more consistent in using pronouns in the classroom. There was also a significant proportion of participants who emphasized using gender-neutral language in the classroom. Specifically, they requested case studies, lecture slides, and syllabi no longer use “he/she” in favor of using “they” as it is more inclusive and gender-neutral. This is a simple change that could go a long way to increasing inclusivity. These changes would begin to address insufficiencies in both explicit and implicit curricula.

Another clear outcome from the data is that many students are not currently aware of the College’s multiple courses that are focused on queer issues. It may be pertinent to create a larger effort to market these classes to students, potentially through student newsletters, the required SOCWORK 3503 course on Practicing with Diverse Populations, or through academic advising. This would allow students who are interested in learning more about queer topics to do so.

Several participants mentioned that they had been asked for their pronouns in their in-person classes, but the same could not be said for their online classes. It may be pertinent to investigate pronoun use in online classes further, as this survey did not include questions asking specifically about online courses. This knowledge is also critical, as there is a complete absence of research on the use of pronouns in online course design and delivery. Given this dearth, the researcher recommends practices such as including pronouns in email signatures, asking for students to provide their pronouns upon introductions, and in subsequent interactions such as discussion posts.

Examples of educational tools to provide to instructors include the pronoun usage guides published by the Bryn Mawr and Smith social work programs (Bryn Mawr, n.d.; Shlasko et al., 2017). The Mulitcultural Center (MCC) at Ohio State also provides “Safe Zone” trainings that cover a wide range of queer topics including pronoun usage (The Ohio State University, n.d.). MCC training can be requested to be held anywhere on campus, and could, therefore, be held at the College for social work instructors. Other opportunities to include guest speakers could be working in collaboration with the Equitas Health Institute, that offers training, presentations, and workshops on providing LGBTQ+ affirming services (Equitas Health Institute, 2019). The researcher recommends mandatory training for all instructors on pronoun usage to aid in the preventing misgendering of students. Additionally, asking for pronouns during introductions should be made a college-wide policy.

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